

9 July 1981

MEMORANDUM FOR: William J. Casey
FROM : Robert M. Gates
SUBJECT : A National Youth Service Program

I send this memorandum to you in your capacity as member of the Cabinet and advisor to the President rather than as Director of Central Intelligence.

One of the consistent threads running through American history has been popular dislike of a standing army and, even in wartime, opposition to involuntary conscription--the draft. The all-volunteer army, started in the early 1970s, was established on the assumption that a more aggressive military recruitment campaign and higher pay would bring into the services a sufficient number of qualified recruits. This approach has led to rapidly escalating costs to entice people into the military and, at the same time, has not resulted in significantly increased reenlistments or maintenance of needed skill levels at the lower enlisted ranks. Also, it has met numerical needs only because the manpower levels have been steadily reduced.

The volunteer army, in my view, has four basic weaknesses:

- Its cost compared to output.
- In any future conflict, American manpower (and casualties) will be disproportionately poor and drawn from minority groups. One of the many criticisms of our participation in Vietnam was that our casualties were disproportionately from these groups. This will be all the more true in any future conflict, with significant potential social and political costs, not to mention uncertainties with respect to the commitment and discipline of the combat soldier.
- From a historian's standpoint, it strikes me as very unwise and shortsighted for the American army to be drawn primarily from the economically disadvantaged. The potential for future combat in which there were significant casualties to promote class hatred and division in this country would be high.

- As a variety of recent newspaper reports and other sources indicate, the basic skill levels of those being brought in is not adequate to meet the challenge of increasingly sophisticated weapons and a more complex world.

Finally, I would point out that the United States is one of only two countries in the NATO Alliance that does not have conscription. Moreover, national conscription is by itself perhaps the most significant expression of a nation's will to meet its security needs. No amount of money allocated to the defense budget says as much about will and determination as a nation's recognition of the importance of a fundamental societal commitment of this kind. It is a commitment well understood by the Soviet Union, whose forces in uniform now are almost three times those of ours.

On the other hand, there is no denying that an attempt to reinstitute the draft would be enormously controversial and politically costly. I hardly need remind you that with World War II already raging in Europe, peacetime conscription was approved by the Congress in 1940 by only the barest margin.

The need for a draft coincides with a parallel, basic societal problem in this country: for 20 years there has been too much emphasis on rights and privileges versus duties and responsibilities. There is in this country a diminishing sense of obligation to country or to the society as a whole. I believe this contributes to a breakdown of social and political discipline that is increasingly destructive of our democracy.

I believe there may be a way to counter these negative trends in such a way that would permit the Reagan Administration to leave behind it a legacy of truly historical importance both for our security and for our society. I believe the United States needs some sort of national youth service corps. It would have the following characteristics:

- All Americans, male and female, between the ages of 18 and 26 would be obligated to serve two years in national service. Each individual could choose a two-year period in that time period most convenient to his or her own circumstances.
- There would be no exemptions except for those severely handicapped.
- A young person would have the option of serving his or her two years either in the military or in a broad range of domestic programs. The latter could include variations on present programs such as those included in VISTA, a reborn Civilian Conservation Corps, the National Park Service, health care services, tutorial work with disadvantaged students, and a broad range of other programs.
- Pay would be based on risk. As an inducement to military service, pay for those choosing the military, could be significantly higher than for most of the domestic programs. Women could choose military service only to the point where non-combat functions were fully staffed.

- Registration, selection of type of service and processing would be administered in a manner similar to that of the Selective Service.
- While service with the military, the National Parks and some other programs would be administered on a federal basis, many of the domestic youth service programs could be administered at the state or local level which could both reduce administrative costs and engender local support for the program by virtue of local benefit.
- Pay would be low. This would be a service program, not a CETA or other kind of job producing program.

I certainly do not claim any originality in advancing this idea. However, I am greatly concerned at the state of our military manpower and also by the widespread lack of any sense of obligation of service to the nation on the part of an entire generation of Americans. I perceive a great deal of self-centeredness and very little sense of appreciation of the "social contract" that has been the basis of our system of government.

I am convinced that a national youth service program could appeal to the latent idealism of young people and also would have considerable public support. A program of the sort I suggest offers the opportunity to help alleviate our military manpower problem, to produce concrete benefit to society as a whole, and to instill both in the direct participants and in the population as a whole a sense that there is an obligation to country and a duty to be performed, both of which are essential to obtaining and keeping our unique American rights and privileges.

Should this notion seem attractive, I believe the President should appoint a bipartisan, blue ribbon Presidential Commission of men and women, which would be given six months to examine the idea in detail and develop a plan for implementation. This same group could then spearhead a private effort to develop broad-based public support--a complement to Administration efforts.

Robert M. Gates